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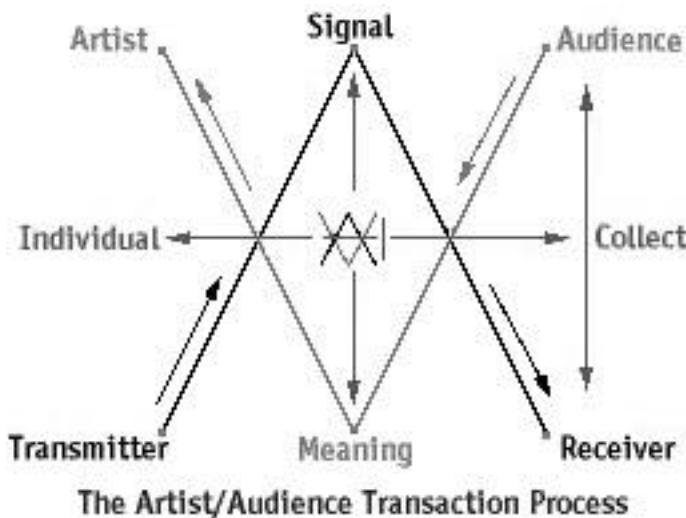
Artists Using Science and Technology

<NEXT>THE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE </NEXT>



Introduction to the Audience Experience: The Many-Sided Conversation

Though every audience is unique, their reasons for gathering are generally very similar: to experience something collective in scope, and yet something personal in meaning. The desire to give and to receive motivates both sides of the conversation. In many ways, audiences function much like a receiver set; to which the artist serves as a transmitter.



Simple enough it would seem, but who is to say that what an artist transmits is received by the audience as it was intended. Just because you speak doesn't mean you are understood. An audience does not simply accept what is presented. It must craft its own response. It does so first by scanning the signal for its concealed meanings. If they are found in sufficient number, the audience proceeds. If they are not, the audience gives up in frustration and lapses into boredom. If the signal is translated successfully though, then the audience is free as a group to give back to the artist - to return the signal, to fulfill the transaction, to confirm that the job is being done. That is the classic form of interactivity, and I would go so far as to say that the pattern holds true for any live audience and for any artist who comes before them seeking their time and attention.

But what about art that doesn't fit into the traditional performance model? What about mechanical or sculptural art, electronic or networked, interactive or telepresent art? The range of variations is endless. What matters more than definitions however is the nature of the transactions that occur. Having the audience networked but not physically present, or by some other means geographically or temporally displaced, does not negate the primacy of the transaction process, so much as it rearranges the variables by which the transaction is accomplished.

Different art calls for different responses. An audience, just like an artist, must play many roles, each with a different focus. Spectacles call for spectators, objects for observers, experiences for participants, rituals for celebrants, games for players and meditations for metaphysicians. Still, whatever the form, whatever the role, at some point the transfer of an experience from the artist to the audience becomes essential. Less commonly articulated is the subsequent transfer of the experience from the audience back to the artist, and then horizontally to and from other members of the audience. That broad-banded experience, which I call here the "the many-sided conversation" is one rich with mysterious approaches. And so here, we have chosen to make it our primary focus.

To help me explore this subtle interconnection, I have asked a group of long-time friends and collaborators to address the audience experience from their own unique perspectives. Marcia Crosby is a decorator/designer and a theatrical producer. Ron Davis is an art director and creator of theatrical interactive experiences. Patrick Martin is an illusionist. Steve Durie and Geri Wittig are interactive artists. Abbe Don is an interface designer and interactive storyteller. I will follow that in summation before asking you to join the conversation at <http://www.ylem.org/AudienceExperience.html>

So, let's begin the show. As our audience, we invite you to sit back and reconnect with your own personal history in these matters, for our intent is to free us both from a tired history and to join each other inside a new realm of possibilities.

Mark Petrakis

Mark Petrakis is a producer and director of live events and new media. He can be reached at <http://www.telecircus.com>

YLEM

President's Report, Members News, and Ylem Events

President's report

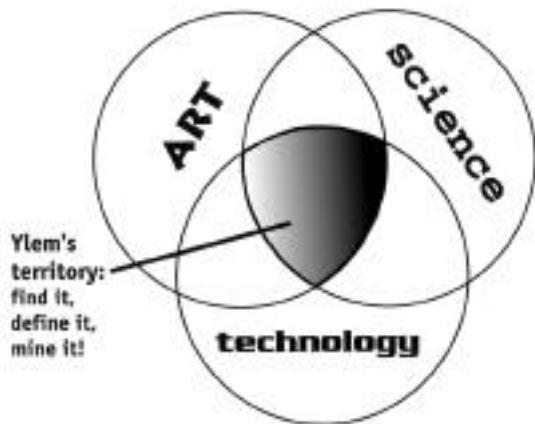
Long-term planning

Ylem's Directors began a process of long-term planning in December, with mentoring help from its Advisory Board members. After nearly 20 years, what are we, and where do we want to go? How can we be more useful to you members? Our all-day meeting only began to provide answers. We welcome your comments, which can be sent to me

<Trudy.Myrrh@stanfordalumni.org> or

Marius Johnston<mariusj@pacbell.net>.

Where do art, science and technology intersect?



For that matter, where do fine art, industry and commerce intersect? "Find it, define it, mine it" was the mandate of the meeting.



Newsletter

It was decided that by keeping a Calendar on our web site current and linking it to other arts calendars, ones that are actually updated hourly, you will get the most up-to-date information. Check <www.ylem.org> often for events and opportunities tailored to your interests!. The newsletter will concentrate on content that has enduring value and will offer space for members' art. Color versions of the same art can be posted online at our site. Longer-term plans call for color in the newsletter.

Web Site

As for the web site, all agreed for different reasons that this can become a tremendous resource branching into all sorts of directions. Marius Johnston is not only enhancing it even as you read, but linking it to more search engines and sites so people will find us. Consider not only a page or link to it, but look at what small, mailable products you would like to sell through us.

Forums and Parties

Besides the regular Forum schedule at the Exploratorium we are seeking out venues in the SOMA art and club neighborhood of San Francisco where we can stage additional forums to show off the work of younger artists. More people are involved in planning parties and field trips. (*Come to the Valentine Party!*) Almost 20 Years? 2001 will mark our 20th year (and the real millennium?). Committees are forming for Events, Exhibits and Electronic Communication. If they are operational by the end of this year we may not only create more opportunities to showcase members' talents, but can contemplate staging an actual celebration. Particularly if you live in the San Francisco Bay Area we encourage you to join a committee or let me know how you can plug in to this.

New Board Members

On January 26 a membership meeting and a board election were held. Many old faces remain: Trudy Myrrh Reagan, president, Eleanor Kent, vice president, Gary Zellerbach, treasurer, Marius Johnston, newsletter executive editor and web master, Stephen Wilson, Barbara Lee, Ken Rinaldo.

We welcome the following new people to the board:

Loren Means is a San Francisco-based artist and writer. His primary medium is painting on film, using chance operations to create in microscopic form for expansion to the macroscopic level. He has recently begun working in the digital medium, creating abstract works using Photoshop. Loren is also a critic, and has written on art, music, literature, and theatre. He edited (Continued page 5)

Transformation

Marcia Crosby

Space and Activity in Fun-Based Environments

An audience is a public group usually centered around an exhibition or performance of some kind. It is understood that the audience is there to experience and respond in prescribed and generally traditional ways to the focus of their collective attention.

A party, on the other hand, is centered on the participants themselves and the understanding here is that the group has formed in order to experience each other.

Simply introducing art into the context of a party could yield a "gallery opening." Here guests observe the art, mingle, but have no context in which to participate. Make the event itself a work of art and each guest becomes a participant, a part of the art, whether they realize it or not.

Transforming an event into art requires several shifts in perspective. First, look at how different people have fun. Guests are typically a mix of extroverts, introverts and those in-between. The extroverts will always be "out there" and the introverts will watch them. So, the initial trick is winning the in-betweens.

Each of us has a comfort zone that largely defines how we will react and behave in public. The stronger the constraint that this comfort zone has on us, the stronger the unexpressed contrary current becomes to break from the status quo and step out into a new perspective.

How do we as artists and experience creators help people to break out? One thing you learn early on producing parties is that people feel safer and more experimental in groups. Within this increased zone of safety, individual boldness finds quick acceptance. The group takes on an identity all its own, hopefully becoming a *cluster* of collaborative players. For example, a group of friends decide to attend an event dressed in a similar theme. As the evening proceeds, the group begins to blur the distinction between guest and performer. They project themselves into the environment as a part of the party experience, becoming a guest/entertainer hybrid, a part of the art. Other guests who encounter them recognize people as "ordinary" as themselves transformed into, and by, artistic expression. They also see the possibilities of their own transformation into creative participants.

Some folks feeling particularly empowered by their newfound status as innovators lead the charge as well as serve as catalysts to convert others to these more active forms of participation. Gradually, the group moves to raise the stakes - costumes and props, character, dance styles and routines are added. All these serve to reinforce the cluster's behavior. Ultimately, the effect on the group, and on sustaining the life of the party rests in the hand of those individuals who together build a subliminal construct of the event wherein they

each grant themselves the freedom necessary to innovate and shape the nature of the experience that all will come to share.

I frequently hear praise such as "...my favorite part of the party was that group who came all dressed as and went around all night doing ." These experiences are so memorable because they involve unexpected transformations where customary patterns of behavior are overturned, and new possibilities are revealed. Such shared memories, this story of "remember that party where..." is a necessary step on the way to building a party-cipatory artistic community.

In transforming ordinary space, here are some suggestions to consider: tactile surfaces, suspended objects, mysterious or unfamiliar items, a maze, childlike or silly decor, thematic and theatrical sets - the more intention you invest in them the better. An environment says to the person entering it that someone took the time to create it - "this was done for me." This predisposes the person encountering the space to give in to it, explore it and interact with it. People then pull their friends into the environment so they can re-experience it by watching their reactions.

How do you set up activities that attract people? Set up a simple activity that is conducive to solo participation, such that a cluster isn't needed to start it off. As one person becomes engaged in the act, it attracts others - people want to join in. More people attract even more people. Often, the result is a spontaneous collaboration between two or more strangers. Sometimes this happens out of need ("Can you hold this still while I glue this part?" or "I'm looking for the letter 'x', if anyone sees one."), sometimes purely for the sake of interaction ("If I put this image on your collage, look what happens"). These 'safe' interactions allow strangers to cross not only personal space boundaries, but class/societal and psychic boundaries as well. The result may be transitory, or it may lead to a conversation where similar interests are discovered, and the individuals digress from the prescribed activity into a more connected and social/verbal interaction. Truly successful activities/environments allow the person to easily segue from voyeur to participant. At that point, the goals of art, opportunity, pleasure and transformation are united, and the success of your party is assured. **XXXXXX**

Marcia Crosby is a decorator/designer and theatrical producer. She can be reached at <anon@sirius.com>

Participatory Performances and Experiences

I have since my college days been intrigued by the potential of interactive and participatory performance. In 1983 I began an eleven-year relationship with Antenna Theater. Working with its founder and Artistic Director Chris Hardman, we explored several permutations of the audience interactive experience over the course of many projects; from the intimate interactive maze to large-scale group experiences. Most of Antenna's shows put the audience in stereo headphones, both to isolate them from each other as well as to put them at the center of elaborate sonic spaces. In headphones the voices one hears seem to emanate from within one's own head. The narrator navigates you with almost subliminal power.

Pieces such as IDLE/IDOL and *Radio Interference* were created using the "Carnival Midway" format; a large environment with several simultaneous interactive events of 5 to 10 minute duration. It is up to the viewer which, if any, event he or she chooses to experience and in what order. This carnival format is the most social of interactive formats. It allows for a mix of experiences, individually, in pairs or groups of a dozen or more hearing simultaneous audio. By employing headphones to drive the events, the experience is not fully revealed until you directly participate. By having the events largely visible to the waiting audience or to non-participating members, it both intrigues as well as disarms any "performance anxiety" (serving alcohol as part of the evenings refreshments also helps).

The "interactive maze" provides for a more intimate experience, one in which isolation can serve the story line. *The Etiquette of the Undercaste* (right) was a portable interactive maze in which audience members entered in timed intervals. Lying on a morgue drawer-like slab, an attendant rolled each participant into the front wall of the installation.

While still lying flat on their backs they experienced an ambulance ride, a hospital emergency room operating table on which they "die", then total darkness in which they hear the dirt shoveled onto their coffin; end of the first sequence. The narrator on the tape instructs

them to stand up and go through the curtain, walk up a ramp into heaven, gaze down on a spinning globe/roulette wheel and then to be "reborn" by sliding down into a new life. On it goes until eventually the "audient" dies on a park bench, then exits the maze three feet from where they entered, having completed a life cycle.

I have put some of these tools to use in the museum environment, creating a ten-minute immersion theater for the California Academy of Science's EARTHQUAKE THEATER. For this permanent exhibit I tried to anticipate audience reactions, and to interject increasingly "in your face" elements to create some of the palpable sense of anxiety that real earthquakes can cause, without actually endangering anyone. What begins as a video presentation with a shaking floor at key moments, becomes a full panoramic view of swaying building complete with flame effects, smoke machines and falling scenery. The program resumes with the video conclusion complete with all the cautionary platitudes about "preparation". As the lights begin to fade up and the audience prepares to exit, an "after-shock" seem to strike the theater itself, sending the overhead lights swaying, and increasing the sense of this being more than a staged exhibit. In this instance a little shaking goes a lot farther, and the element of surprise remains intact.

All of these events rely on anticipating the expectations of the audience. The size of the space, the dimness of the environment, the angle of the walls, even the presence of certain smells can sharpen the audience's sense that they are more than observers. Clarity of the audio directions within an event can eliminate confusion, or controlled confusion can create the dramatic effect that puts the audience at the emotional center of events. XXXXX



Ron M. Davis *The Etiquette of the Undercaste*

Ron M. Davis is an art director and exhibit designer. He can be reached at <RonMDavis@aol.com>

Ear magazine, and has guest edited issues of the Ylem Newsletter. His art work is on permanent display at Artisans Gallery in Mill Valley, California.

Barbara Mehlman is the founder of VIA/Visual Intelligence Artists which is developing Artitorials: the ability to go on-site to an event and create Multimedia stories in real time. Currently, she is documenting and illustrating the transformation of a small town and how different generations view this. For the project Barbara has been designing both the software and journalistic procedure for capturing live on-going events. Her work has appeared in Time magazine and on CNN's Future Watch. She has spent over 20 years as a painter and sculptor and 16 years in the computer graphics industry. She has designed for print, CD-ROM and the Internet for several companies. Her fine art works combine digital, video and traditional mediums. She currently teaches at CCAC, SFSU Multimedia Studies Program, Foothill and Diablo Valley College.

Patricia Tavenner psychic, astrologer and healer who integrates these disciplines in her artwork. Patricia, listed in Who's Who of the World, has also made contributions to the following books: Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, by Thomas Albright, Collage Techniques by Gerald Brommer, A Point of View. Visual Poetry: The 90's, Dimitry Blulatov, Ed. (Kalinigrad, Russia, 1998); and Timbres d'Artistes by Jean-Noel Laszlo, (Paris, 1995). Her work has also been published in the journal Leonardo. Her art work has been shown in over 350 exhibitions in 30 countries. Selected collections include MOMA, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Royal Collection in Antwerp, Belgium, and the J.Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. She has taught and lectured widely and is a member of the University of California Extension art faculty.

We are proud to welcome them all!

Trudy Reagan, president

Members News

Barbara Nessim writes:

"Just to set the record straight—I didn't do The Breast Cancer stamp. Everyone thinks I did it for obvious reasons—it looks just like my work. It's not the first time my work has been copied! All My friends, art directors, illustrators, past assistants think I did it too, so you are not alone. What I did do was the poster for the American Cancer Society in 1984...[and] the cover for the New York Times Magazine article, "Breast Cancer in Young Women 35" ... Both are included in the essay 'The Line of Least Resistance' on my www.nessim.com site."

Nessim has another site, not linked to this:

www.barbaranessim.com

Ken Goldberg, a UC Berkeley professor who specializes in robotics, is one of 10 Bay Area artists included in the Whitney Biennial in New York. This is the first year that Internet art has been included. Ken's piece, "Ouija 2000," is an online ouija board that toys with mysticism and poses questions such as: How do we know what we know? How do we know "truth" when it is passed through technology like the Internet? It is

also on display at the Berkeley Art Museum and at www.bampfa.berkeley.edu. **Guy Marsden** recently sold one of his "Digital Numeric Elevator" electronic artworks to Parallax Inc. ([parallaxinc.com](http://www.parallaxinc.com)). The company is the maker of the Basic Stamp microcontroller that was used in that artwork and many others -both his own and works he engineered for others. His new web site is www.arttec.net

Lucia Grossberger-Morales created "Rayas," an interactive kaleidoscope, at the Contemporary Arts Forum for Santa Barbara's millennial celebration, "First Night."

Corinne Whitaker's Digital Giraffe www.giraffe.com has been given a "Top Quality Award" by Tripod Awards of Canada "for its outstanding content and visual appeal. This is a site well worth visiting and recommending to others."

Diane Fenster has a 3D digital animation titled "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even . . . more" based on the artwork by Marcel Duchamp. It has been accepted into the The Victoria Independent Film & Video Festival and will be screened at the next Festival held February 4th - 10th, 2000. According to the *Variety 2000 Movie Guide*, VIFVF is one of the world's new leading film fests. The same animation is being screened on the Internet.

Ylem Events

Ylem Valentine L2K Party!!!

Friaday evening, February 11, 8 pm at the South Bay home of Robert Sloan 1550 Jasper Drive, Sunnyvale

Info: DanielK@vertical.com

Join us for Valentine fun! Bring finger food or beverage to share. Tim Black, who did the amazing "L2K" (2000 light) display at Burning Man last year, hopes to demo some of his LED pods that he programs for animated effects.

Year 2000 Ylem Forums at the Exploratorium Mark your calendars! March 15, May 17, July 19, September 20, November 15 Owing to the Exploratorium's wonderful new art series, "Second Wednesdays," Ylem must move its Forum series to the third Wednesday. As always, they will happen on the odd-numbered months. In the even-numbered months we are seeking a South-of-Market venue that is inexpensive and has some equipment where we can present the work of emerging artists.

Opportunities Ylem Members Created

The Ylem Web Site Link

Many of you have web sites. If you do the courtesy of putting a link to Ylem on the initial page of your site, we'll link the Ylem Artists page

[<http://www.ylem.org/NewSite/YlemArtists.html>](http://www.ylem.org/NewSite/YlemArtists.html) to yours.

If you do not want a return link on your page then we will be happy to link you on our Other Places page. It's that simple. Contact Marius Johnston at mariusj@pacbell.net or leave a comment on the web site. www.ylem.org

Enchantment

An Interview with Magician Patrick Martin

Magicians and Their Audience

Mark Petrakis: How is skill transferred among magicians? Those I've known have been tight-lipped; somebody must be talking to someone

Patrick Martin: Yes, but the way that it is done is quite varied. For me, it is a very self-taught art form. Most magicians learn by themselves through books and experimentation; though now there are videos and chat rooms for magicians on the Web. If you're lucky, you meet a master at a conference for the conjuring arts. Some, of course, will tell you nothing. But if you ask the right questions, you may get an answer that completely expands the way you think and relate to your work.

MP: How do magicians regard the audience?

PM: Many magicians confront the audience in an adversarial way. It's almost as if they want to irritate the audience to force a reaction. I find that annoying and counterproductive as it only inspires skepticism. The audience must duel with the performer, stepping back and trying to figure out the "trick". In this way, they are separated from the possibility of enjoying a magical experience that may take them beyond themselves or beyond what they see.

MP: What would you say is the counter-position to that confrontational style of performing?

PM: Something that includes their own intelligence and creative spirit. You're setting up little dots of reality that they can firmly hold onto. The audience then fills in blanks to create their own little enchantment. From the same basic illusion, everyone experiences something slightly different from everyone else. Instead of being tricked with a series of flash card challenges, the audience is actively engaged and participates in the work.

The art of magic uses our reliance on intellectual evaluation of perception to show how easily they can both be manipulated. Discovering this also helps release us from the burden of reality. In every moment we have to keep so many facts in place in order to hold up our universe that it's sometimes refreshing to be reminded that it doesn't matter what we think.

MP: What do you see as the difference between sleight of hand close up magic and large illusions, in terms of the audience experience?

PM: Each involves a different way of handling energy for the performer. The more personal the experience, the deeper it

affects you. Close up work has the advantage of involving the audience directly. As a magician I can look into your eyes, observe your movements and reactions. Like a skilled Tarot Card reader or hypnotist, I move through your beliefs system to tailor the experience.

A stage show is a different beast. There you are after the kind of larger rhythm and flow that you just can't achieve on a small scale. The art of magic is taking a mass of people and making them all feel like they're one. You can feel it in the audience - you can feel a sweep through the audience as you say something and you know by the timing of it how long it takes the audience to get something. You know how quickly you can communicate with this audience and on what level. With certain audiences you can get into esoteric things that completely change the shape and color of the performance.

Different cultures respond to magic differently. In general, the Japanese love mechanical contraptions, while Europeans appreciate presentations with subtleties in psychology. Americans are used to instant information, so the pace of the show must be quicker and more to the point. Performances I've given for the Gyoto Monks of Tibet or for villages while traveling in Bali have integrated their spiritual connection to the world where magic is a common experience.

Whether the illusion is close up, on television or on a large stage in the middle of a redwood forest, it is only by inviting the audience to personally participate in the creation of the illusion, that they will realize their interconnection. Dissolving the limitations of perceptions allows for an even more intimate appreciation of our shared reality. Magicians and Their Audience

Mark Petrakis: How is skill transferred among magicians? Those I've known have been tight-lipped; somebody must be talking to someone

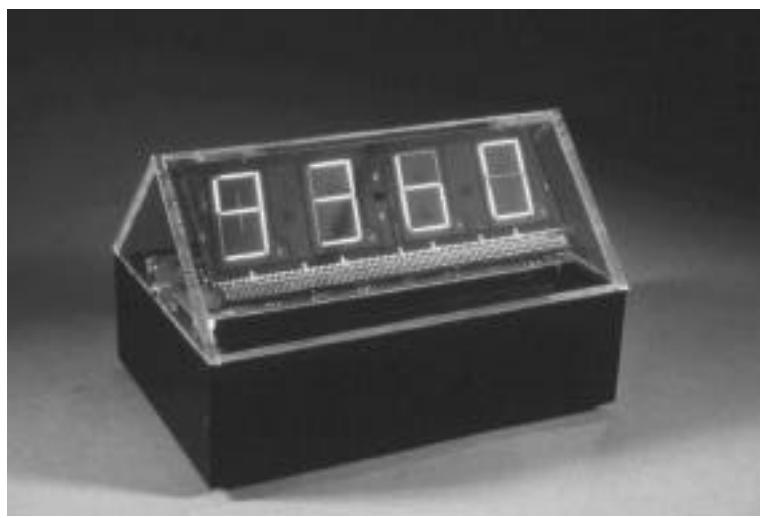
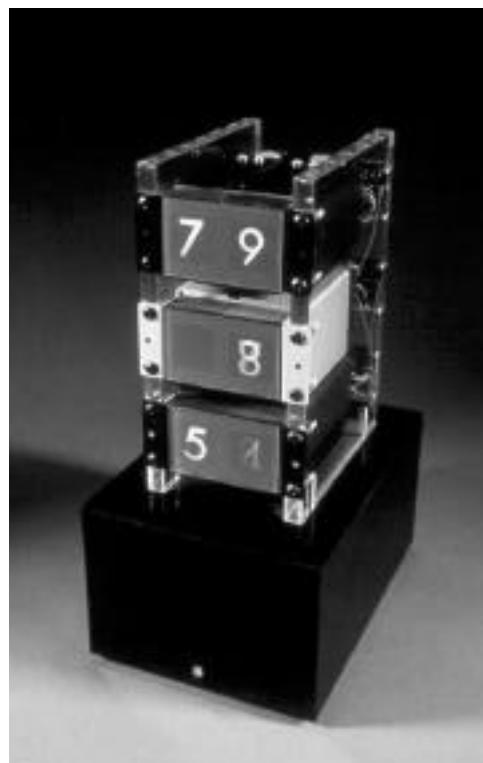
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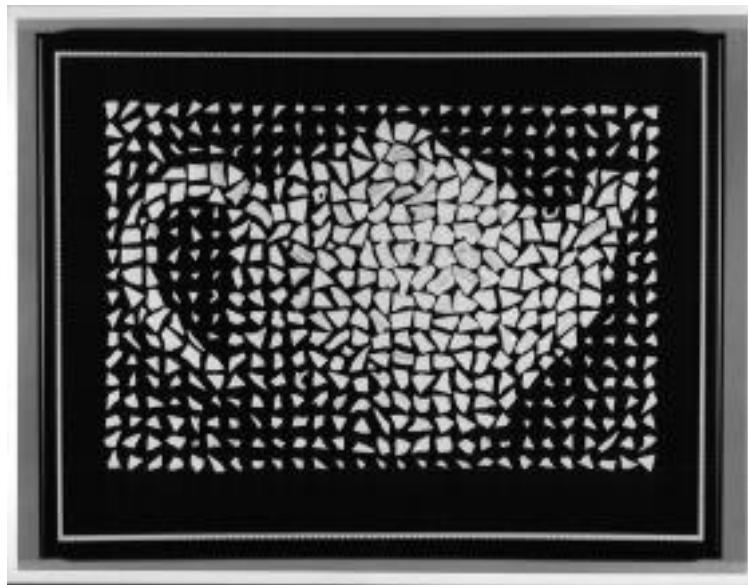
(Continued on page 9)

Guy Marsden

Guy Marsden. *Digital Numeric Relevator Mk XI - transient couplings*. May 1995.
Working electronic parts, acrylic and laminated wood 15 X 10 X 8".



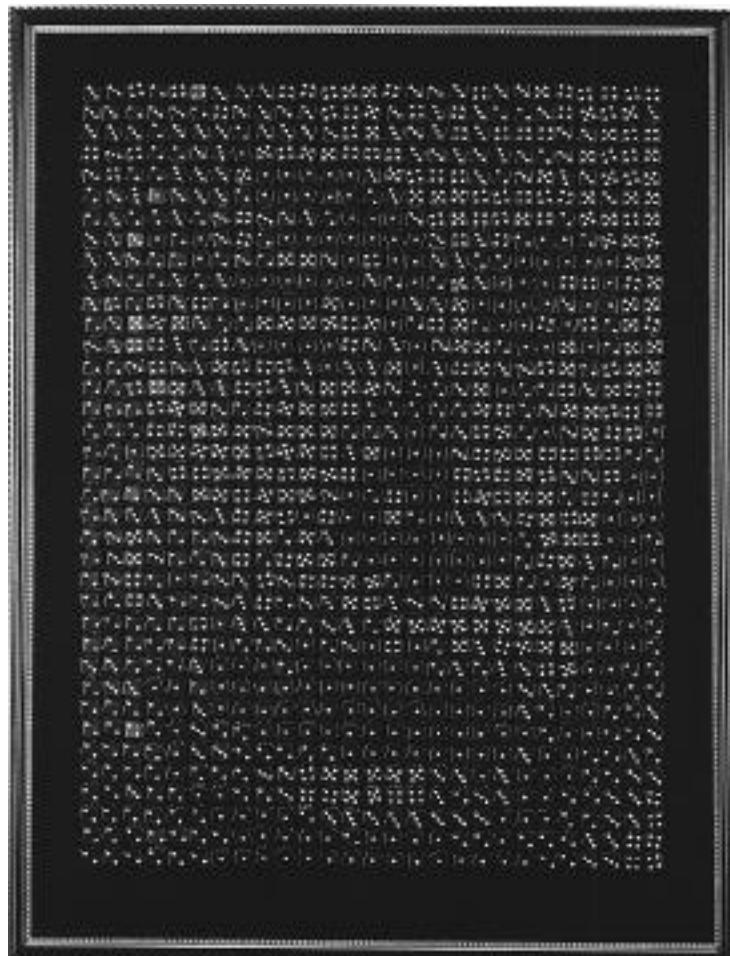
Guy Marsden. *Digital Numeric Relevator Mk XIII - hexadecimal habitation*. July 1995. Working electronic parts, acrylic and laminated wood 10.5 X 7 X 7".



Ken Knowlton. *Retrieved Icon*. 1998.
Constructed from 491 fragments from an
archeological site somewhere in Utah,
believed to represent 99 percent recovery
of one teapot. 20x26" ©Knowlton, 1998

Ken Knowlton

Ken Knowlton. *Albert Einstein ("I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world." A. E.)*. 1998. 999 dice, ©Knowlton, 1998



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Patrick Martin is a highly regarded illusionist who creates unique magical events throughout the world. He can be reached at <patrickmagic@earthlink.net>.

Public Art for a New Audience

Art in its public mask is changing as the temporal, dynamic, and decentralized qualities of electronic art bring forth new expectations between artist, art and audience. Traditional public art institutions, for all their awkwardness in presenting new forms like net.art are still seen as authoritative bodies of critical evaluation. This relationship, once seen as adversarial, is increasingly moving in a more interdependent direction. This movement is reflected in the changing balance between established public art forms and a growing e-public audience.

For example, the public art scene's desire for promoting work that reflects our "hi tech" and emerging virtual communities must face compromising conditions when bringing these new art modes into the contentious forum created wherever art meets politics.

The advantage of marble park sculptures is both their literal and symbolic properties of strength, wholeness, and permanence. Giant forms of indestructible concrete and bronze typify what we have come to expect of public art.

In contrast, the maintenance issues and dateable nature of electronic art makes it a difficult choice when seeking to make something last for 50 years. But electronic art, whose creative kernel can be contained in software, is much better adapted to continuous interaction and change.

Unlike most public art where collaboration if it exists, happens during the creation and installation phase, electronic art's dynamic and interactive nature can evolve with the community, reflecting their collective identity, concerns, etc. Ongoing collaboration and accessibility gives electronic art a unique advantage in the civic public art domain.

Just as processing power breaks free of desktops and private networks, so must its artistic destiny transcend the private domain in search of a more public and collective platform.

Of course, the kind of fluidity offered by electronic art can be a point of contention. Participation and interaction with the audience means that the work is never set or consensus is never reached. This leaves issues of control and intent up to the community to reconsider on an ongoing basis. This ephemeral form switches how one approaches planning "permanent" art projects towards models of other more temporal media forms (i.e. television, radio and theater).

In the "public" realm of the Internet, art is facing new complexities of artist, audience, sponsor, and institution. The interplay of top/down - bottom/up and interiority/exteriority are in flux.

Hopes for egalitarianism and bottom/up communication models migrated over to the Internet, along with the public, beginning in the early '90's. But from the beginning, these ideals have been in conflict with prevailing hierarchical

tendencies. 1993 was a watershed year for net.art, with the release of graphical browsers into the Internet mix, but it was 1996 that the net.art movement grew explosively, when networked communities, such as **Rhizome** <<http://www.rhizome.org>>,

nettime <<http://www.nettime.org/>>, and **7-11** <<http://www.7-11.org>>, emerged. It was in these networked communities, that net.art was able to reach a critical mass - creating an online, global net.art community where interactive experimentation could be witnessed and recorded for a geographically displaced audience/community.

As David Ross, director of SFMOMA, stated at a CADRE lecture, *Net.art in the Age of Digital Reproduction* <<http://switch.sjsu.edu/web/vSnl/ross/index.html>> - "Authority shifts between reader and writer... an artist can generate a work where not only the nature of where an audience disperses and reassembles, but also how that critical line of being a writer and being a reader is blurred, eliminated."

Net.art is now moving into a new stage of its evolution, as those such as Ross, from the art world establishment begin to take notice and point to it with the authority of their curatorial stature. The Walker Art Center's Steve Dietz, has taken a curatorial lead in the net.art arena and for the first time, the Whitney will include Internet art in its Biennial 2000 exhibition. There are those in the networked community who would bemoan such an institutionalization of what has been a thriving grassroots scene, but the introduction of the established players doesn't signal the demise of the rhizomatic net.art phenomenon, simply a new perturbation in the symbiosis of these two systems. Both systems have an interiority and exteriority that is unique and often diametrically opposed, but the qualities of their various dynamics are also beneficial to the ongoing development respective evolution of either one, which will ultimately open up the artist/ audience/ institution amalgamation into domains otherwise untapped.

The fast mutable qualities of electronic art assure that any present developments will quickly educe a new systemic interaction, in both the physical and networked public arenas. XXXXX

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Storytelling

Abbe Don

The Unexpected Journey

Stories told to oneself or others can transform the world. In her book ***Number Our Days*** anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff explains that everyone has a story. Helping others tell their stories means "no one could be regarded as completely dull, no place people lived in was without some hope of redemption, achieved by just paying attention."

Successful storytelling depends on the give and take relationship between the storyteller and the audience. In the oral tradition, this relationship is explicit as the teller responds to the reactions of the audience. Written works, on the other hand, create an abstract and implied relationship between the writer and the reader.

Storytelling in an interactive and networked context changes the dynamics between storyteller and audience by creating a symmetrical relationship in which everyone has the ability to be both teller and listener, writer and reader.

Understanding, facilitating, and enhancing this dynamic is the focus of my work.

In 1989, I began exhibiting an interactive family album called ***We Make Memories*** that simulates the way my great-grandmother told stories. Inspired by playwright Bertolt Brecht's notion of breaking the fourth wall, I was convinced that interactive media was the key to engaging audiences in a new way. While ***We Make Memories*** may have broken some new ground in interface design and exemplified the potential for the computer to be a personal storytelling medium, the interactivity was limited to a narrow path of predefined branching narratives.

However, the piece had an unanticipated impact as a strong catalyst for people to tell me their own family stories. Yet, I could not be physically present every time someone interacted with the piece. Even when I did hear the stories, there was no way to capture them to include them in the narrative mix.

I created a companion piece called ***Share With Me a Story*** in 1991. This new work ran on a separate computer and enabled people to scan a picture, record an audio story and type a caption. While I continued to advance the "audience as collaborator" agenda, the piece fell short of my goals in several ways. First, the catalyst material and audience's stories needed to be more seamlessly integrated. Second, the story sharing process was too cumbersome which created bottlenecks and frustrated the audience. Third, once the exhibit ended, no one had any further access to the stories.

Apple Computer's introduction of QuickTime in 1992 made it possible to create site specific installations that enabled people to tell their stories in a one-step video recording process. The bottleneck was minimally addressed but the other issues remained.

By 1994 the World Wide Web eclipsed the need for site-specific kiosk installations. Suddenly, it became possible to create an environment that was open all the time, accessible from anywhere in the world on any type of computer, and enabled multiple people to view the work concurrently.

In 1996, I launched ***Bubbe's Back Porch***, a web site dedicated to personal and family storytelling. Bubbe, who is modeled after my own great-grandmother, welcomes people to the site, tells her own stories, offers tips on personal storytelling, and suggests themes that help people organize their stories and find connections with each other.

Bubbe <bubbe@bubbe.com> has daily email contact with her visitors. From my perspective, this immediate contact with the audience is the single most revolutionary aspect of working in this medium.

Sharing photo albums on-line has recently caught the attention of large corporations such as Adobe, Hewlett Packard, and Kodak, along with startup companies such as Zing, Shutterfly, and Snapfish. These commercial efforts to reach a general audience are important but they lack the intimacy that creates a sense of place and a sense of ownership for the audience. Few sites facilitate the telling of stories which is ultimately where meaning is created and connections are made. Without these multiple levels of meaning and connection, a photo album is just a set of personal artifacts collecting virtual dust on the World Wide Web.

Facilitating the transformation of personal media artifacts into universal stories helps us find redemption and meaning. Creating convivial environments allows anyone to be both artist and audience thereby democratizing new technology and transforming the ways in which we create and share our cultures, beliefs, and values. **xxxxxx**

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A Theory of Living Fun

So, in the brief space available to us, we have explored the notion of the audience experience and considered it from multiple angles.

In *Transformation*, Marcia Crosby showed us where it starts: the ability to work with people and space - to see what needs to be done, and then to do it.

Invoking *Participation*, Ron M. Davis looked specifically at the interface between audience and action. What is the intent of the experience and how do you tease the audience into following you towards that end?

By way of *Enchantment*, Patrick Martin's empowering view of the audience as an accomplice to the act of magic challenges us to balance innocence and intelligence into a single perspective.

Looking at *Interaction*, Steve Durie and Geri Wittig opened up the issue of how electronic and interactive art may well transform all notions of art and public space.

And finally, in the act of *Storytelling*, Abbe Don tracked her journey through the great mother archetype of memory and shared experience that is at the core of the artist/audience experience.

Which leaves us right *here*, at a point where technology offers us all sorts of new options for amusement and group response. A Theory of Living Fun extends the artist/ audience transaction by suggesting that communication in any medium is enhanced when art and ideas are balanced with a healthy measure of interaction and improvisation.¹

1. An audience capable of such interaction and improvisation did not emerge from a vacuum. In music, art, dance and theater the evolution of the audience experience has been shaped by a host of innovators who challenged the audience to reconsider their role in the transaction. To make a very cursory example of theater, historians like to trace the birth of the modern audience back to Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, which caused riots when it premiered in 1896. It served as a harbinger of dadaist and surrealist experiments which would displace and outrage audiences already unseated by the bloody drama of World War 1. These attacks on conventional theater (and by extension, reality) were intensified in pre-Hitler Germany by Bertolt Brecht and his movement to redirect conventional audience sentiment towards political action. Art, if it is to be political, cannot escape the reality of the street. Absurdist drama in the post-war era rewired audiences if not to revolt, then at least to recognize irony, parody and dark comedy. When regarding human behavior. The Situationists, who presaged much of the revolutionist rhetoric of the 60's raised the necessity of superseding art by creating liberated situations in which life can effectively experience its own possibilities and not become enclosed in the repetitive role models that the "society of the spectacle" constructs in order to dominate and exploit its controlling agenda. It was the Living Theater of the late 60's who reduced the issue to its most basic level by

There are more than enough signs evident that we are undergoing a fundamental change in how audiences form, how they encounter new work, how they help shape that work and how they communicate with each other. Observe the following:

- Rave culture and the rise of the DJ have made the rock star largely obsolete among audience/communities that have moved beyond passive spectatordom.
- Video games have allowed two generations of kids to see their TVs as something more than passive viewing boxes.
- The Internet, by way of email, chats and message boards, has brought audience members into direct contact with their heroes, but more importantly with each other. The horizontal many to many sprawl of these audience members into each other's life is wholly unprecedented.
- Theme parks are becoming ever more interactive. The range of experiences they offer are ever more demanding and even risky. The increasing popularity of extreme sports, rugged eco-tours and participatory workshops is another signal of our changing definition of what it means to be entertained.
- Corporations are newly focused on their show - on the entertainment side of their marketing message which has the effect of turning customers into audience members.
- Live events and large stores are becoming increasingly mediated; webcasts, videowalls, and all sorts of immersive and even networked environments.

Clearly, the next generation audience raised on high energy megashows and festivals is now scanning the horizon for transmissions of a more empowering and involving nature.

Those of us in the Bay Area who have witnessed the rise of the *Burning Man* <<http://www.burningman.com>> phenomena through the 90's, know the profound effect that its "No Spectators" policy has had on our local art/technology community. This annual do-it-yourself gathering of thousands in the desert of Nevada casts a long shadow of influence across the West Coast art landscape. It has inspired thousands into seeing themselves if not as artists, then at least as celebrants in an art-driven ritual. (continued next page)

standing naked on stage and inviting the audience to join them. From there to here, through thirty years of sex, drugs and rock n' roll is less than a stone's throw.

And in such an environment, it should surprise no one when audience members cross the proscenium line and assume a central focus. In the context of *Burning Man*, participation in the art making process is considered by many to be something of a civic responsibility. That is a very different model than the one promulgated by commercial interests whose profits depend on keeping their brand of art/stuff floating like a blimp above the heads (but not above the pocketbooks) of the masses.

So, at the same time that technology presents us with a great monolithic virtual simulation of reality, it also reveals new ways around this omniscient data construct. The implication here is that the medium is subject to manipulation in both directions, from above AND from below - a far more democratic model of meddling than was previously possible. The implications for artists and audiences are limitless.

What new forms will emerge in the coming years? What models of audience/artist interaction can we expect to see? As with so much in the past decade the most likely scenarios are the least predictable ones. The best forecast we can provide to artists is to listen closely to your audience. Talk to them. Engage them. Ask them for feedback. Do not avoid, but rather embrace the politics of audience as community. And for audiences, the challenge is not to settle for less, but to push forward in asking of art that it raise the bar to ever finer and subtler levels of interaction and realization. If we are going to leave the security of passivity, then give us something worthy of the risk.

As the boundary between art and life further dissolves, we must see that art exists as an integral part of our life experience. As yesterday's boundary between art and audience dissolves as well, we must learn to accept the multiplicity of responsibilities that accompany such a change.

Have you had an audience experience that stands out for you? What was it that made it so exceptional? Head over to <<http://www.ylem.org/AudienceExperience.html>> to add your experience. Thank you. xxxxx



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*n., pronounced eye-lum,
1. a Greek word for the
exploding mass from
which the universe
emerged.*

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